

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
August 9, 2026
Luke 4

“Christian Nationalism: A Theological Error,
Gerrymandering the Bible”

Welcome back to week 2 of my sermon series on Christian Nationalism: A Theological Error. If you missed week 1, you can find a printed copy of it on the church’s website, or you can watch the livestream of last week’s service on our website or YouTube channel.

The topic this week is the Bible, and how Christian nationalism uses the Bible. Just as political gerrymandering redraws voting districts to favor a political party, “biblical gerrymandering” carves up and distorts the Bible to fit a particular nationalistic/political agenda.

Christian nationalism does this by cherry-picking verses that fit their political ideology and goals. This way of reading the Bible isolates certain verses while ignoring their broader context. CN also ignores inconvenient teachings of Jesus, in order to turn complex texts into political slogans or to justify the use of power or exclusion to further divide us.

One favored verse CNists often use comes from the book of Esther, “for just such a time as this”. That phrase has been used to support everything from gerrymandering districts in Missouri, to spreading misinformation about vaccines; and by certain candidates to declare that God has put them in that place and that time to win said election. And countless other instances; that are far too many to list here.

The problem with using that passage, though, is that it misses the broader context of Esther, and why she said it in the first place. That’s too long to explain in this sermon, But even if you push that explanation aside as some type of “woke” interpretation of the text, we’re still left with the plain fact that no where in the book of Esther is God ever mentioned! So, there’s a whole lot of taking a verse out of context, and twisting and distorting it to

prove to folks that God wants this! The implication being that the speaker of such phrase was placed in that time and place by God for just such as time as that. But Esther never mentions God!

This leads me to what I hope is a refresher on how Presbyterians read scripture. Presbyterians believe in the authority of scripture. If you've been ordained, you've affirmed this vow.

That doesn't mean, however, that we believe the Bible is inerrant or infallible, meaning free from error, as some claim it to be. There are 66 books in the Bible, and there are even more authors since some of the books have multiple authors; and the books were written over the course of 2100 years, depending on how old the Book of Job is which is the oldest book and we believe written anywhere from 1500-2000 BCE. Compare that to John's gospel, which was written around 100 CE.

People are often surprised when I tell them that the reformers, John Calvin included, were not at all troubled by the fact that the Bible had discrepancies and errors; in fact, the Reformers took it in stride. In Calvin's opinion, discrepancies and errors were the result of the fact that God had accommodated to human frailty in the process of self-revelation. That's a fancy way of saying God is revealed to us in the Bible, but because it was written by human hands, there are bound to be errors. The image Calvin used was of God speaking with a lisp or stammer that we can't always understand, so in a person's attempt to write down God's word, he (or she) got some of it wrong.

When Presbyterians state we believe in the authority of Scripture, This means we have to take the good with the bad. No cherry-picking for us! Because the thing is with the Bible-anyone can take a verse and twist it and distort it, anyone can pick a verse out of the Bible and say, "See, I told you so!" But you can't pick and choose. You have to look at the whole thing, and ask for some help from the Holy Spirit, and then try to discern what God is saying today.

When I introduce the scripture readings on Sunday mornings by saying, "Listen for the word of God as it comes to you today," this isn't fluff. I'm serious; it's also very reformed. The reformers believed whole-heartedly that the Bible is the living word of God. It wasn't something written two thousand or so years ago and once the final chapter was completed, that's it, God has left the building! We always need to ask what is God saying to us today. Not ten or twenty years ago or 100 days ago but today.

The Biblical writers wrote for their culture and were a product of their culture. That's one of the reasons why Presbyterians look at the how, when, why, and where of the text. When was it written? Why was it written? Where was it written? How was it written? And how do the answers to these questions help inform the meaning of the text and shed light on it. For example, the Bible supports slavery but today we don't. So we look at that passage in its historical and literary context to try to decipher who the audience was, why the author wrote it, and what it means for us today. This is what "exegesis" is. But even with a good exegetical reading of a text, it can still be hard; because some stories and teachings are just plain hard. The story of Issac's near sacrifice which we heard a few weeks ago is one of them! Jesus' instruction to love our enemies is another, or to give away all our possessions! But if we can't toss it out, what do we do with it? We wrestle with it to try to gain a clearer understanding of what God is trying to tell us today.

We don't simply declare, "Well those writers were wrong and we know better!" (Some of you may be surprised to hear me say that!) Hear me out. This is important:

It's not OK for us to apply our values to the Bible. That's what Christian Nationalism does. Two wrongs don't make a right. We don't get to take a difficult passage and simply say, "Well, that's not what I believe, so the Bible must be wrong." Instead, we come to Scripture ready to have our own values challenged.

What we need to do, what we should do, is apply Jesus's values (seeing as he is the living Word of God) to our values and chances are good that the more scripture challenges your values, the closer you're getting to

understanding the living Word of God. If the Word affirms everything you believe, you're reading it wrong. We don't measure Scripture by our values. We let Scripture, and the living Word measure ours.

So what happens when we let Scripture speak rather than making Scripture say what we want it to say?

Today's passage from Luke's gospel gives us some insight.

This story from Luke is one of my favorite stories from the Bible because it's one of the few in which we get a glimpse of Jesus interpreting scripture. I've preached on this many times, so I'm not going to go into the details today, only the broad overview as a refresher of what's happening, because context is important.

In Jesus' day, any man in the synagogue could volunteer to read from the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) or the prophets and then give the sermon. On this particular Sabbath, Jesus volunteers, and asks to read from the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he then concluded.

Well, that was music to people's ears! Because they were poor, and very much in need of liberation from oppressive structures; to hear that the economic structures that kept them poor and sick and imprisoned would be overturned was incredibly good news to the listeners. The congregation hears what they want to hear. Good news for us! Liberation for us! God is on our side!

But Jesus didn't stop there. No, he went further and preached a message they didn't want to hear. He reinterpreted this familiar story into something new; something that aligned with his mission and vision of God's kingdom. And man, they didn't like it one bit. In fact, they tried to run him off a cliff.

So what exactly did Jesus say that upset them so much?

Well, he reminded them of two people the prophets Elijah and Elisha healed. The first person Elijah healed was a “certain widow” at Zarephath. She was an outsider; meaning she was not an Israelite nor a believer in God. And yet God chose the widow at Zarephath, the nonbeliever to heal; while the believers, the faithful, went hungry.

The other person Jesus reminded them of was Naaman the Syrian. Naaman had leprosy and he, too, was a nonbeliever. In fact, when he needed to be healed of his leprosy, he at first tried to buy Elisha’s favor. And yet God chose to heal Naaman before any of the faithful believers.

As the theologian N.T. Wright once wrote, “(Jesus’ sermon) is like someone in Britain or France during World War II speaking of God’s healing and restoration of Hitler. It is not what people wanted to hear.”

And so the people tried to run him off a cliff, because Jesus interpreted Scripture in a way that challenged their assumptions about who God's grace was for.

Friends, the hard truth here is God does not care about our assumptions and biases. As the late Peter Gomes wrote: “The people take offense not so much with what Jesus claims about himself, as with the claims that he makes about a God who is more than their own tribal deity.” Christian nationalism, take note: God will not be gerrymandered. God will not be gerrymandered to fit into narrow political ideologies.

In Luke 4, Jesus redraws the boundaries.

But crucially, Jesus doesn't redraw them to make Scripture easier. He redraws them wider, and that’s hard for his congregation.

The widow at Zarephath.

Naaman the Syrian.

The people outside Israel.

The hometown congregation didn't expect God to care about those folks.

Christian nationalism gerrymanders the Bible by drawing boundaries around the people God is supposed to care about. Jesus does the opposite in his sermon and his teachings. Jesus keeps taking the boundaries we draw around God's love and pushing them outward.

Which should not be a controversial theological statement to make. And yet today, we have very loud voices from Christian Nationalism circles telling us that it's OK to hate our Muslim neighbor, our gay neighbor; our Black neighbor, our foreign neighbor. Some of the most dangerous voices speak fluent faith. And they arrive wearing a cross, trading the living Word of God for cruelty — giving permission, in God's name, to stop loving neighbors and start hating enemies.

But scripture never gives us permission to hate. Ever. If your reading of scripture gives you permission to hate or despise people, you are reading it wrong. Christian nationalism has ushered in an era of breathtaking mean-spiritedness among those who identify as Christian.

The answer to such mean-spiritedness? Read the Bible! Read the parts that make you uncomfortable. Read the parts that challenge your politics. Read the parts that challenge your assumptions. Read the parts that make you angry. Wrestle with them. Argue with them. Bring your questions to them. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand them.

But whatever you do, don't make the Bible smaller so that it can fit inside your assumptions and biases.
Because God will not be gerrymandered.

Thanks be to God.
Amen

Sources: [The Bible According to Hristian Nationalists](#), brin Kaylor, Chalice Press, 2025